

Medieval Executioners [Keskiajan pyövelit]

By Hannele Klemettilä

Sample translated by Owen Witesman

Back cover text:

“Burning, decapitation by sword, interment, dismemberment, breaking on the wheel, hanging, dragging through the streets, blinding, cutting off of ears, amputation, whipping and use of the pillory.” Thus a learned man listed the required skills of an executioner in the sixteenth century.

Executioners were an indispensable part of the medieval judicial system. Nevertheless, they were abhorred and feared, for they dealt with blood, which was perceived as being dangerous. In paintings and in the theater, executioners were depicted as incarnations of evil and brutality.

The generously illustrated and incisively written *Medieval Executioners* tells of the official administrators of violence who lived on the edges of society in Europe. In addition to the work-a-day life of executioners, the book describes public punishment spectacles, which if they went wrong could also mean the executioner’s life. The book also acquaints the reader with the few professional executioners whose life stories have escaped the custom prevailing in the middle ages to remain silent about executioners. *Medieval Executioners* also challenges the reader to ponder the place of violence in contemporary society.

PhD Hannele Klementtilä’s book is based on her monograph on executioners in France and the Burgundian Netherlands.

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A JOB FOR LAY MEN

From the beginning the position of executioner was understood as only being appropriate for laymen. The Church forbade those belonging to the priestly class from performing any duties that were connected with the shedding of blood. Thus ecclesiastical courts had to shift criminal cases requiring death penalties to secular tribunals.

The most famous medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), reminded in his work *Summa Theologiae* that the representatives of the priesthood were barred from all killing for two reasons. First, Christ himself had taught by his example that violence should not be met with violence. His servants were expected to imitate their master and this example of non-violence. Secondly, they were to follow the *New Testament's* precept of loving one's neighbor. In order to be true servants of the “new covenant,” they had to abstain from participation in executions or mutilations. Aquinas explains that it had been different in ancient times; priests had been able to kill malefactors with their own hands. They had served the “old law,” which included corporal punishment. Nevertheless, now the office of priest had a higher purpose than the administration of punishment: concentrating on the saving of souls.

Although the executioner could not be a member of the priestly class, it was nevertheless an absolute requirement that all those named to the position must be Christian. Jews, heathens and infidels were not to be recruited for the office of executioner. It was also the ideal of the authorities that the official executioner also carry some responsibility for the salvation of criminals' souls. Insofar as sins were left unconfessed, the executed person would be damned. Sometimes the condemned would confess additional crimes, even during the execution ceremony, in the hope that enactment of the punishment would be postponed to allow for additional investigation.

The right of priestly confession for the condemned was confirmed by a papal edict in 1311, but the edict was broken from time to time because it made it possible to increase the severity of punishments. Thus in the year 1427 Jean Tiphaine, the executioner of Paris, got a taste of his superior's staff at a hanging ceremony when he expressed his due concern about the condemned's confession. The condemned was an armiger—a knight's armor bearer—named Sauvain de Frémainville, against whom the Duke of Bedford held a grudge over an attempted kidnapping. Frémainville was condemned to death on trumped-up charges, and there was a desire to carry out the sentence quickly. When during the execution ceremony the condemned requested to receive confession, an irritated Pierre Baillet, the Bedford treasurer, forced him to approach the gallows ladder. Baillet himself climbed after, berating Frémainville, and beat the condemned with his staff when he answered in kind. When the concerned executioner then inquired about the confession, Baillet gave him five or six strokes as well. The alarmed Jean Tiphaine rushed to complete his task,

but in his nervousness he bungled it so the hanging rope came untied. The condemned fell to the earth, breaking a rib and his tibia. Nevertheless, he was forced to climb back up the ladder to be hanged.

In addition to churchmen and non-Christians, the position of executioner was also considered inappropriate for women during the middle ages. However, during the 13th century women were sometimes used for executioner's duties. This is suggested by the example of an edict given by Ludwig IX (1214–1270) in 1268, which had to do with the punishment of perjurers and blasphemers. According to the edict, 10-14 year-old individuals who were guilty of said crimes were to be publicly whipped, naked, according to the seriousness of the act. Women were to be lashed by a woman, without any men present. The punishment was to be carried out unless it was redeemed by an appropriate monetary reparation.

The female executioners' duty was thus the execution of the lesser punishment of whipping on young women. The reasons for this practice were decency concerns. Female executioners disappeared quickly, for the role was understood as clearly belonging to men. The wives of official executioners (in French *bourrelle*) nevertheless often acted as aids to their spouses in the late middle ages and at the beginning of the early modern period. Outside of the large cities official executioners did not have the resources to pay assistants and finding them was also extremely difficult in general. Thus the wife's help was necessary.

Violence was clearly gendered in medieval culture. The idea was considered inappropriate—and even unnatural—that a woman would carry a weapon or take part in violent activities such as waging war. Bearing arms was a privilege of the nobility and the urban bourgeoisie, reserved for men. Possible physical aggressiveness demonstrated by women was treated with disfavor and fear. A good example of this discordant attitude was Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orléans. Many contemporaries considered Joan unnatural and unpleasant because she participated in warfare and dressed in men's clothing, thus breaking a biblical injunction (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:5). According to the attitude of the time, the shedding of blood and war were not necessarily reprehensible things when it was a question of promoting peace and masculine activities. With women the situation was different: violence was unequivocally connected with bloodlust and murderousness.

CONDEMNED TO BE AN EXECUTIONER

The authorities had constant difficulties in finding individuals desirous to work as full-time executioners. Thus, already at an early stage a practice was established whereby in lieu of professionals the assignment could be offered to a condemned criminal. He received a pardon if he

agreed to accept the position on a permanent basis. Indeed, during the period of the office's differentiation and establishment many executioners were former condemned criminals.

The chronicle of the fabric merchant Philippe de Vigneulles (1471-1527) reports the great difficulties of the officials of the town of Metz, which belonged to Germany, in filling the executioner's position. Despite extensive inquiries, no professional was found, and thus in lieu of anyone better, the assignment was offered to a journeyman named Géraird Noirel who as a result of his crimes had been condemned to be exiled from the city. The man lodged in a small shack in a vineyard near Saint Martin. Noirel consented to accept the office of executioner and was pardoned for all of his capers. "He was also given a handsome suit and money in his purse" (*luy fut donnés encor une belle robbe, et de l'argent en sa bourse*), the chronicler tells. Noirel's first responsibility was a beheading by sword, the successful accomplishment of which was not a matter of course. However, the new executioner received some surprise aid from a stranger who had recently arrived in the city from far-off in France to pursue the position he had heard was open. The man said that he was a master executioner and the son of a master. Despite his disappointment, the stranger was a great help to Noirel, Vigneulles notes, for he helped him carry out his first master work (*chief de ouvre*) and in addition to this showed Noirel everything he needed to know about the profession. The helpful stranger lingered in Metz for several weeks familiarizing Noirel with the myriad tasks of the official executioner.

Filling the office of executioner with criminals was problematic, because they often lacked the knowledge and skills necessary for the assignment. The practice also affected the image of executioners and public attitudes unfavorably. Although no decent person would voluntarily accept the position of executioner, which was perceived as disgraceful, on the other hand it was also difficult for people to approve of the idea of a criminal as a champion of justice. Many still remembered the old rules of trial by combat: those who could not defend themselves—women, the elderly, priests—were never to choose a criminal as their champion.

The case of Jehan Lescuyer of Dijon serves as a good example of how it could be difficult to train an individual with criminal tendencies, a person who disdained accepted standards of morality, to be a decent executioner. The Duchess of Burgundy promised Lescuyer, who had been convicted of theft, a pardon on the 24th of April 1414 if he would agree to become the official executioner of Dijon. Lescuyer agreed, for this allowed him to avoid having two ears chopped off and being permanently banished. The residents of Dijon nevertheless came to regret the choice. In 1426 the city authorities passed a new sentence of banishment on Lescuyer, finding that he was a "seditious, quarrelsome, noisy, blaspheming libertine, and such a poorly-behaved man that his neighbors cannot live with him in peace" (*homme sédicieux, rioteux, noyseuls, juraix, putien, et homme de malvaix gouvernement et tel que ses voisins ne (peuvent) avoir paix a lui*).

EXECUTIONERS' FEES AND LIVELIHOOD

Even by the late middle ages a person taking up the position of executioner could not expect good wages. First of all, official executioners did not receive a regular salary for performing their duties, instead being paid a separate commission for each punishment they carried out. At the same time the executioner would bill for necessary materials and equipment (French *utensile* e.g. a sword, ax, knives, branding irons, tongs, ropes, a chopping block, firewood for a pyre etc.). Procurement, maintenance and storage of these items were also his responsibility, for no one else wanted to have anything to do with implements associated with execution. Public punishments were particularly expensive for the authorities in those places where they did not have a permanent executioner. They had to pay the travel expenses of an executioner, who often had to come from a great distance, as well as the expenses connected with housing him.

Documentary sources show that in fourteenth century Avignon the executioner received two *sous* and six *deniers* for a whipping. As the fee for a whipping combined with cutting off an ear the official executioner was paid seven *sous* and six *deniers*. Executioners' fees did not rise as the fifteenth century came. It can be seen from the ledgers of the Rouen criminal court that on the tenth of August 1411 executioner Guieffroy Therage was paid 20 *sous* for dragging through the streets—low-born evildoers were transported to the place of punishment bound to a wooden framework—and hanging a convict named Collin Clemence, as well as 12 *deniers* for a pair of gloves. Some ten years later (February 28, 1420) the same master Guieffroy delivered a bill for the punishment of Gardin Hermenoult as follows:

Beheading 20 s.

Displaying the corpse 10 s.

Cart 5 s.

Lance 5 s.

Dragging on grid 10 s.

Grid 2 s.

Gloves 12 s.

The yearly salary for a craftsman in the fifteenth century gives a baseline for the size of executioners' fees: 20-30 *livres*. This sum corresponded for example with the price of a horse. One *livre* was worth 20 *sous* or 240 *deniers* – one *sou* was twelve *deniers*. What could one get for one *denier*? For example in Paris at the beginning of the fifteenth century, wheat bread cost one-half to

two deniers depending on size and quality. Normally an average loaf of bread worth one denier weighed around one-half kilogram

In Kaufbeuren, Germany, at the beginning of the early modern period, the executioner was paid for carrying out various tasks as follows, in florins:

Beheading 4.–

Burning at the stake 4.–

Hanging 4.–

Breaking on the wheel, placing head on pike and removing 4.–

Transporting the condemned to the place of execution on a grid (per horse) 1.–

Crushing with pincers 1.–

Cutting off of nose and ears 1.–

Cutting off of hand 1.–

Burning with hot iron 1.–

Whipping 3.–

Pillorying 1.–

Torturing or presenting instruments of torture 0.45.–

Being present at trial by ordeal (without participating) 0.30.–

Burying malefactors 2.–

Fetching suicides from the scene of the act 6.–

Before resorting to actual torture, the executioner attempted to coax the suspect to talk by presenting instruments of torture, and sometimes this indeed sufficed. As is revealed by this price list, the executioner did not necessarily take active part in a trial by ordeal. Sometimes his duty was simply to show himself to the person being questioned, who, terrified by the somber form of the executioner, often became more cooperative.

Because the executioner—especially in small cities—was not able to live only on commissions received from punishments, it was common to grant him small preferences to ease his daily subsistence. In many places the executioner had an exemption from paying taxes and duties. In many French cities the executioner also had the so-called right of *havage*. The term comes from the old French word *havée*, which means handful or piece. This was some sort of natural tax, according to which the official executioner had the right to take a certain portion of the foodstuffs and other products brought into the city for sale. The right of *havage* of the executioner of Paris in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries included permission to demand tariffs of certain out-of-town merchants and lepers. He was also allowed to keep for himself the clothes of the convicts against

whom he had carried out punishments. The condemned's belt and accompanying money on the other hand belonged to the warden, up to a certain value. In 1530 the executioner's right of *havage* was codified such that the practice was normalized all over France. As time went on, more and more articles were included, and when the right of *havage* was repealed on July 6, 1775, the executioners complained bitterly. In terms of their livelihood and standard of living this was an extremely significant loss.

Alongside their official duties, executioners also had certain required secondary tasks, which will be dealt with below. Despite all these small additional sources of income, the official executioner's income was not generally very good, let alone reliable, at the end of the middle ages. A good example of the weakness of executioners' economic position is offered by the case of the executioner of Metz, master Cottin. In November of 1483 Cottin stabbed a man during a fight and was ordered to pay a fine. He himself was not able to settle the required sum, nor did he have relatives or acquaintances to whom he could turn in his distress. So Cottin's punishment was changed to having a hand chopped off, which meant that he could no longer continue in his post. Executioners' salaries did not rise until the early modern period. At that time practitioners of the profession could live comfortably – although ostracized from society.

CHALLENGES AND DANGERS OF THE OFFICE OF EXECUTIONER

Because the penal system at the end of the middle ages included numerous forms of corporal and capital punishment, regular and successful performance of the office of executioner was not a given. It required stout and versatile professional proficiency. During the first half of the sixteenth century the Fleming Joost de Damhouder, who had studied law at Orléans, listed in his work *La pratique et enchiridion des causes criminelles* ("Manual of criminal proceedings") the methods of punishment that an executioner had to command in his office: "burning, decapitation by sword, interment, dismemberment, breaking on the wheel, hanging, dragging through the streets, blinding, cutting off of ears, amputation, whipping and use of the pillory." Damhouder's list is not complete, because methods of punishment varied from area to area.

The executioner was subjected to many kinds of dangers in his work, for example when dealing with fire and blazing hot irons. Also handling steal weapons—knives, daggers, axes and swords—was never completely without risk. In addition the condemned were not by any means always cooperative, which could force the executioner into a trial of strength with his "customer." The struggle could end up benefiting either party. Philippe de Vigneulles mentions in his chronicle an incident relating to this which occurred in 1482 in the city of Metz. A French soldier named Fouttin was to be hanged. The man unexpectedly got his hands free while he was on the gallows ladder and

tried to throw the executioner down. Master Jehan was startled, but held his ground and in the end was able to carry out the sentence. The next executioner of Metz, Waulter l'Allemand, ended up in a similar situation in October 1495. On his way to the gallows was a 22-year-old picardian man who had stabbed another man in a tavern, angry because he hadn't gotten enough to drink. The condemned was stoutly-built, and his capture had been difficult, just as his hanging: on the gallows ladder the man struggled ferociously with the executioner and tried to push him down, but did not succeed and ended up swinging.

Waulter l'Allemand lost his life in June of 1507 in connection with a trial by ordeal. Waulter was an experienced professional; he had carried out the office of executioner in Metz since at least 1492 when Philippe de Vigneulles mentions him for the first time in his chronicle. In June of 1507 master Waulter was supposed to assist in the examination of a notorious journeyman from Lorey who was suspected of a crime. The examinee had succeeded in concealing a knife in his clothing without anyone noticing. When he had been escorted into the examination room and master Waulter began strapping him to the torture bench, the man took out the knife and struck the executioner with it. Waulter died immediately. The examinee was chained at the feet, so he was not able to kill any other lawmen at the scene, although he did terrify them with his loud ranting and raving. The murderer was taken back to his prison cell where he was forced to wait a good long time for his sentence because the authorities had difficulties finding a new executioner. Let it be mentioned that later the journeyman in question was revealed to be innocent of the crime for which he was intended to be examined. Instead he was executed for master Waulter's murder.

Especially the successful performance of the method of execution favored by French executioners—beheading using a heavy two-handed sword—was a task at which the unskilled easily failed. The citizenry of the city of Lille was greatly astonished while following the sentencing to death and execution ceremony of a rapist and murderer named Baudechon Mallet. Those at the occasion were able to bear witness to a display of never-before-seen sword handling. On the execution platform Mallet defiantly refused to kneel to have his head chopped off. There was great astonishment when the city's executioner unexpectedly beheaded the man while standing, from the front and with only one swift stroke of the sword. This sort of stunt had never been seen before, states Jacques du Clercq (1420–1501), the son of an advisor to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, who reported the incident in his memoirs. The reputation of French executioners as skilful sword handlers may have been a partial reason why England's Henry VIII's (1491–1547) order for Anne Boleyn's execution (1536) stipulated that an executioner be fetched from Calais on the other side of the channel. English executioners had become accustomed to handling the ax, but the notion of the time was that the ax was an instrument for the execution of vulgar, lowborn rebels and the slaughtering of animals. Thus it was not appropriate for the severing of a royal neck.